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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out three criteria for identifying good retrospective accounts of curriculum development projects. A "retrospective account" is a history. Such histories of curriculum development projects help in making sense of the course of deliberation that has produced a curriculum. Making the deliberation intelligible is, in turn, necessary for intelligent implementation of the curriculum. The three criteria of accounts that serve such purposes well are the following: the account must deal directly with the thinking behind crucial decisions, the picture of the deliberation must be based on documentary and corroborative evidence, and the account must be intelligible as a story. These criteria are derived from certain principles of contemporary historiography. (Author)

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WHAT IS A GOOD RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNT?

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If we wish to make better curricula, we ought to examine (among other things) our own experience in curriculum planning. So Wise has argued here, while Singer, Altschuld, and Lave have tried to do the very thing for us. It is my task today to act as critic of their papers.[1] For a start, however, I want to say a bit about the identifying marks of a good retrospective account.

By a good account I mean nothing fancy. A good account is one that works, one that helps us make sense the course of deliberation that's produced a curriculum. A bad one is no help. Perhaps this seems an obvious thing to say. Still, it points to the kind of problems that a retrospective account is suited to solve. They are problems of intelligibility.

Curriculum development confronts us with problems of intelligibility because it is a complex endeavor. It frequently engages many people, each of whom has his or her own idea of what should be happening. It takes place in public deliberating sessions, in solitary writing sessions, in classroom tryouts--settings and circumstances of the greatest variety, sometimes all at once. It demands that developers think about the matter to be taught, the teachers, their students, and the circumstances of the teaching; to think about these as the means of working out

the plan for the teaching; which working out is commonly a collaboration under pressure of time, requiring decisions whose consequences are difficult to foresee. Plainly, curriculum developers are forming impressions of all this activity as it is happening. Equally plain, however, is the difficulty of coming to terms with it, while it is happening. Some events we inevitably don't see, or misapprehend, or forget; our working impressions, though serviceable for getting the job done, are likely to be faulty. Indeed, from the perspective of one's working impression, many of the project's decisions may be inexplicable. And that is a problem when one wishes to convey to teachers the underlying rationale for certain features of the curriculum's design. It is equally, though less obviously, a problem in affording someone else the benefit of a designer's experience. This is the sort of problem that retrospective accounts can help us solve, if they're good ones.

What, then, is a good one? The question is forbidding when asked in general this way. For what Wise calls a "retrospective account" is nothing other than a history. And the question, "What is a good history?" should stop our mouths with humility if we were to attempt any hasty general answer. At the same time, however, it suggests

places where an answer may be sought.

By acknowledging that we're talking here about doing history, we will have located a substantial literature filled with examples of the study of deliberation and containing criteria for telling better studies from worse. The literature is, of course, that written by historians. Political historians have long studied the deliberations of those we now call policy makers, as have the biographers of political figures. And historiography, one of whose branches is the study of historical method, addresses the criteria for identifying good historical accounts. In fact, some historiographers have dealt explicitly with historical accounts of deliberation.[2]

I do not claim a specialist's knowledge of historiography. My reading in the field is, I'm afraid, shamefully spotty. Nevertheless, I shall draw freely on what I understand about current discussion in historiography in proposing the following three criteria for identifying good retrospective analyses of curriculum development.

First, I prefer accounts that are on topic. As I've said, I believe the main use of retrospective accounts is to make sense of a course of deliberation. By rights, then, center stage belongs to an account of crucial decisions in a project and how they came to be. I want to know, above all, how the deliberation proceeded.

Second, I want to know that the account is based on evidence. I've said that I believe retrospective accounts are best for remedying the defects of memory and perception. The evidence should be the sort that helps us overcome these defects. Two devices seem especially useful for this purpose. One is tape recording and the other is testimony from multiple sources. Documentation and corroboration are commonplaces of historical method; I simply suggest that they will serve our accounts as well as they serve the historian's.

Finally, I want the sense of a story--preferably a good story. This is not just because I love to be entertained. It is also because narrative is one of the most important forms of historical explanation.[3] It is important particularly when the historian's aim is to give an intelligible account of how certain people came to make certain decisions. This is precisely the aim I propose to the writer of retrospective accounts of curriculum development.

Narrative is the form that a historical account takes when its author has figured out how the particulars of the case fit together. Assembling the particulars into a story is a strenuous conceptual exercise, as anyone who has tried it will testify. It is also the condition for putting our own experience in a form that others can understand. If the writer can't tell us the story, or

doesn't, we readers probably will not find the account intelligible. And an unintelligible account of curriculum deliberation really is no help.

NOTES

1. The criticisms of papers presented at this session are not included in this draft. These papers are: Robert I. Wise, "A Case for the Value of Retrospective Accounts of Curriculum Development"; Norman M. Singer, "A Retrospective Analysis of the Development of Program Criteria"; James W. Altschuld and Janice S. Lave, "A Retrospective Analysis of the Development of a Project Monitoring System."

2. The book that serves as the most influential reference for historiographic discussion of deliberation is William H. Dray, Laws and Explanation in History (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). For more recent and explicit discussion of the historiography of deliberation, see Howard Adelman, "Rational Explanation Reconsidered: Case Studies and the Hempel-Dray Model," History and Theory 13 (1974): 208-24.

3. The character of narrative explanation has preoccupied a surprisingly large fraction of historiographic thinking during the last decade. A reasonably balanced (and brilliantly written) explication of the role of narration in the historian's methodology can be found in J. H. Hexter's The History Primer (New York: Basic Books, 1971).